

## Roadrunner

I sit up, spread my toes in the soft shag, clear my eye-boogers out, and get right into the bathroom so I'm ready to rock when Uncle Henry gets here. Mamma said he got his car repainted and I get to see it before anyone else, so he is coming to pick me up and take me to get an ice cream! Mamma said he is *finally* going to stay for dinner tonight, too.

It's Saturday, so I watch cartoons while I get ready for Uncle Henry. I brush watching Bugs, I eat with Elmer, and I get dressed laughing at Daffy.

I hear a rumble outside getting closer to the house, and I jump out of my chair and dart to the front window. I pass Mamma as she finishes fixing up the fancy tablecloth, but she is right behind me quick as a cat and dressed fancier than when she goes to church.

"Hun, why don't you go back to your cartoons 'til Uncle Henry gets in?" she places her hand on my shoulder.

Wile E. Coyote is on now, but I have seen this episode before, so I just can't pay attention. When it seems the rumbling outside can't get any louder, it goes quiet. The silence is followed by a loud clap. Heavy footsteps make their way to the door and it opens. Uncle Henry's voice booms through the house like a drum and Mamma's follows like a squeaky pedal. I hear Mamma telling him, "I'm so glad you made it, he's just bouncing off the walls

excited." Then the squishy area below my ribs is shocked by an iron grip and I squeal as I'm thrust into the air. I grab his rough, hairy fingers, then turn to hug him. Every time I see him I try to picture what he really looks like behind his big eyebrows and bushy moustache—all so dark that his teeth and the whites of his eyes shine behind them.

"I've been pretty *bubbly* today, too. S'pose that'll happen when ya look forward to somethin' so long and it finally comes up." He turns his smile to me. "Ready to rock, Kidlet?"

"Oh yeah!" I reply, "I don't think I've ever been ready for so long."

"Want me to give ya some time to finish watchin' before we go? Hell, most kids yer age live fer Saturday morning cartoons." He chuckles through his moustache and looks over his shoulder back towards Mamma. She giggles and smiles real big, then turns away to the kitchen. "I'm sure she'd love a hand settin' up fer the big day," he says, setting me down.

"Most kids don't have an *Uncle Henry* to come get them!"

Uncle Henry frowns and scrunches his eyebrows. "I s'pose I never thought of how amazing I am," he breaks into a grin. "I reckon yer ready to see the car then, huh?"

"Sure am! I bet the new paint has it shining like a silver bullet."

“Well, Kidlet,” he rumbles, his eyes sparkling. “I decided to try something a little different, a bit more flashy.” He shows his teeth from behind his moustache and winks. No way. Uncle Henry always loved his car just the way it was. “Well don’t just stand there tryin’ to catch flies in yer mouth, go check ’er out!” he laughs deep in his belly. “Shit, that’s why I brought ’er to *you* first. I been sweatin’ like a stuck pig to see what’cha think.”

I fly down the hallway, throw open the screen door, and stop dead at the sight of it. His mint condition, 1972 Plymouth Roadrunner used to be silver, and it was the nicest car I’d ever seen. Now it’s a bright purple piece of muscle that jumps at my eyes and shimmers like the paint is still wet. I run circles around the car soaking up every new detail and comparing it with my memory of how it used to look. Uncle Henry strolls out of the house with Mamma hanging on his arm and the key ring swinging on his finger. He breaks off from her and jumps down from the porch.

“So what’d’ya think?”

“It’s incredible!” I tell him without taking my eyes off the beauty. He holds his palm out at me and runs to the front of the car.

“Did’jya check this out?” he asks me as he runs his finger along the side. There is a long yellow dust trail all the way down the side of the car, coming from a little Roadrunner bird painted next to the headlight. Straight from the T.V.

“Woah,” I hear myself say, though I don’t really mean to. The corners of Uncle Henry’s moustache are nearly touching his ears.

“Yeah...” he scratches his head and chuckles, “I figured ya’d get a kick outta that.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Uncle Henry rips up the road as we fly towards the ice cream parlour, faster than the real Roadrunner’s ever gone. He throws in an 8-track and asks me if I’ve ever heard of *Jimi Hendrix*. I shake my head.

“Well this is *perfect!* Only makes sense to jam to *‘Purple Haze’* in my newly purple ride, don’t ’cha think, Kiddo?”

“That isn’t the reason you painted it purple, is it?” I tease.

“Maybe it’s ’cuz I thought *you’d* like it,” he leans over and pinches at my arm, “ya little dink.”

“Oh yeah, I bet,” I tell him, making sure he sees me roll my eyes. He shakes his head at me and turns the stereo up. It isn’t long before we’re jamming out, drumming on the dashboard and swinging our heads to the wail of the electric guitar. On straightaways Uncle Henry lets go of the wheel to join Jimi on air guitar. We’re coming up on the parlour and Uncle Henry turns down the stereo to interrupt our personal concert.

“Pop quiz, Punk,” he shoves my shoulder and points out the windshield like he is about to stick his finger through the glass. “That, there, is a Pontiac Firebird convertible in original candy-apple red.” He scrunched back to get his hand in his pocket and pulled out a quarter. “It’s yours if you can tell me the year on that baby,” he held it out to sparkle in front of me.

“1966?”

“Close! It’s a ’67 but I’ll give’r to ya,” he flicks it into my lap, “them Firebirds can be hard to tell apart.” Uncle Henry takes a deep breath. “So, Kiddo,” he leans forward out of his seat, his voice oddly soft. “How’s yer Mamma doin’? You takin’ care of her?”

“Course, Uncle Henry,” I beam back. “I keep my Bible studied and my schoolwork finished. When I head to bed, my teeth is brushed and my toys put away, just like you asked me too. Mamma’s even noticed and told me she really appreciates me helping out ‘n’ such, just like you said she would.”

“Good man,” he says as he leans back into his seat, with rumble back in his voice. “‘Cuz yer Mamma, Kiddo, she’s a real special lady.” He turns to look at me. “An’ if I heard you was doin’ anything *but* take care of her, well, I might just have t’give ya quite the lickin’.” His whiskers twists upward.

“You’d never do that!” I taunt back. Lightning flashes through his moustache.

“Hell, ya may be right,” he booms, “but I’d sure as hell feed’jya.”

“Feed me what?”

He holds his hand up in front of my face. It closes into a fist. “A goddamn knuckle sandwich is *what!*” He roars and runs his knuckles over the top of my head. Our laughter drowns Jimi out as we pull into the parking lot.

Uncle Henry hops out of the car and jogs to the ice cream shop, he turns and points at me, teeth bright against his mustache.

“Strawberry, right Kiddo?” he shouts back and I flash him a thumbs up out the window. He nods and disappears behind the reflection coming off the glass doors.

When Uncle Henry bounds back from the parlour, ice cream cones fill his fists. He walks to my side of the car, gravel crunching under his boots. Carefully, he hands me the cone through the window. Strawberry to me, chocolate to him. I tell him “thanks!” as he hops in his side and flips his 8-track on. A new song starts. “*Foxy Lady*,” he says.

“Y’know, Kiddo...” He breathes out, and keeps his eyes on his ice cream. “Makes me real proud ya took my advice, ‘n’ makes me even happier yer Mamma was so ‘preciative of it.” He looks at me for a while and breathes hard out of his nose as he rolls his lips into his mouth. I look away to tend my ice cream. “Y’know yer

Mamma's a real special woman, eh Kiddo?" he says, turning to look out the windshield. His voice is warmer now and I feel like he is waiting for me to respond.

"Yeah, I suppose."

"Naw, but I know it, Buddy," he looks to me again and scrunches his eyebrows, and then he goes back to his ice cream. The car is real quiet now, and Uncle Henry can't seem to decide where he wants to look.

"Y'know, Kiddo..." he begins, staring out his window, "it's been real tough on yer Mamma since yer Father..." he stops himself and groans. "Now what I mean is, y'know how you call me *Unc-*" He is cut off by a yellow 1969 Chevy Camaro ripping into the parking lot. It is stuffed with teenage boys whooping to guitar riffs blasting from their car, clapping the driver on the shoulder as he spins doughnuts round the parking lot. They swing by us, spraying pea gravel across the side of Uncle Henry's freshly painted baby. The sparkle drains from his eyes, and his teeth become hidden behind his moustache as it falls. His face is dark; I've never seen it like this before.

"Uh... Uncle Henry?" I ask, trying to snap him out of silence. His eyes stay locked on the Camaro. My stomach drops. He opens his newly chipped door to get out, leaving it open. He walks across the lot and the crunching gravel scrapes against my ears, louder than before. The crashing cymbals from the song replace the sound of the gravel as he moves closer to the other car.

My Uncle gets to the Camaro and pulls the driver halfway out the window like he's flipping a pocket inside out. He holds his other hand high in the air. It closes into a fist. I turn my head down and look at the floor mats inside the Roadrunner. I hear the song playing: *Da-dum dum crash, da-dum dum crash, Foxy!* My hand is shaking, and I can't make it stop. *Da-dum dum thud, da-dum dum thud, Foxy!* My ice cream is melting, and sticky pink liquid runs down my hand. *Da-dum thud thud, da-dum thud thud, Foxy!* I stare right at it, watch it slowly drip down my hand and arm, falling onto my pants. I make sure it is only on my pants and not on Uncle Henry's seat. *Thud thud thud, thud thud thud, Foxy!* I focus on the melted mess so hard my vision blurs.

Henry shuffles back into the car and snaps me out of my trance. We screech out of the lot and I force myself to look at the other car as we leave. The driver is still hanging out of the window at the waist. Dark red runs down the side of the car, dripping onto the gravel like melted ice cream.

Henry drives back in complete silence. I fidget back and forth, making sure to keep the mess on my lap, *only* on my lap. There is nothing to listen to but the roar of the engine; the 8-track must be finished.

"Do you want to put some more music on or something?" I ask him. The blood on his knuckles has turned brown since we left. "Did you just see that green Challenger go by? I think it was '71, what do you think?"

“Don’t, Bud.” He doesn’t look at me. “Let’s...” he sighs, “let’s just get back fer that dinner.”

He parks in the driveway and we both get out of the car real slow, closing the doors carefully. Mamma dashes out with a wide grin and an apron on, letting the screen door swing on her way out. She stops on a dime with her toes hanging off the front porch, stood straight up and stiff like a dog who senses its owner come home. Henry looks at her and shakes his head, then looks down at his feet. She slumps back into herself the same way.

“How was it, Sweet Pea?” Mamma sighs and tilts my head up to get a look at me. Her face is tight and wrinkled.

“It was good,” I force out of my closed up throat, looking back down at my messy pants.

“That’s nice,” she sighs, “why don’t you head to your room and get cleaned up, so that me and Uncle Henry can talk?”

As I close the front door, I watch both of them quietly get in the car. On my way down the hall, I see the kitchen all full of pots prepped on the stove, a bunch of veggies and a big chicken, and three of Mamma’s nice plates I’m not allowed to touch are out like we are getting ready for Christmas dinner. I change my clothes and fiddle with some of my toys while trying to peek out my bedroom window, but I can’t quite see the car on the driveway. When dinner time finally rolls around, Mamma shuffles inside and shakes her head at me. She droops around, tidying up the extra spot at the table, and puts the third plate back in the cupboard.